In search of ancient childhood, good and bad

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CHRISTIAN LAES, *CHILDREN IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE: OUTSIDERS WITHIN* (Cambridge University Press 2011). Pp. xv + 334, figs. 6. ISBN 978-0-521-89746-4. $105 [English adaptation 2011; first published in 2006 as *Kinderen bij de Romeinen: Zes Eeuwen Dagelijks Leven*]

For a few years now the debate among Roman social historians on the idea of the family, gender, and the life course has focused on adult-child relationships. After claiming, in reaction to Ph. Ariès' thought-provoking denial, that the notion of childhood did exist in antiquity, historians have deepened the search for the cultural perception of ancient childhood,[1] with a large range of publications attempting to clarify the status of the child and the nature of family bonds; they have been examining Greek as well as Roman childhood as "constructions", in the phrase of A. Cohen and J. Rutter,[2] highlighting socially-determined behaviours, and unveiling affective ties and private emotions behind conventions, often as a result of a new attention paid to the material evidence.[3]

A comprehensive study of ancient childhood is still lacking: our knowledge is gradually building up thanks to collective publications, for the topic requires a challenging interdisciplinary approach, combining written sources with iconographic, archaeological and osteological evidence, and involving different criteria, physiological, social and religious.[4] It also demands an appropriate methodology in order to avoid confusing the representations with past realities.

C. Laes' book, the revised version of a Leiden doctoral thesis of 2004, translated into English and adapted to a wider audience, exemplifies the new developments at different levels. His aim is to transmit the Roman experience of childhood during the Late Republic and Imperial era, aware that it is being filtered to us by the perceptions of a cultivated male élite, our chief source of information. Children, like slaves and women, did not speak for themselves: they are only mirrored by adults.

The order of the chapters follows the life course, from birth to schooling, work and initiation into sexuality. Laes uses a wide variety of written sources (epigraphic, literary, papyro-

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1 Ph. Ariès, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris 1960). See, e.g., the impact of the *Roman Family conferences* inaugurated by B. Rawson (ed.), *The family in ancient Rome: new perspectives* (London 1986). Cf. V. Dasen, in collaboration with D. Lett, M.-F. Morel and C. Rollet, "Dix ans de travaux sur l'enfance," in *Enfances. Bilan d'une décennie de recherche = Annales de démographie historique* 2 (2001) especially 6-17 and 47-73; V. Vuolanto, "Children in the ancient world and the Early Middle Ages. A bibliography", http://www.uta.fi/yky/yhteystiedot/henkilokunta/villevuolanto/index/Children%20in%20the%20Ancient%20World%20and%20the%20Early%20Middle%20Ages.pdf

2 A. Cohen and J. Rutter (edd.), *Constructions of childhood in ancient Greece and Italy* (Hesperia Suppl. 41, 2007). See, e.g., S. R. Huebner and D. M. Ratzan (edd.), *Growing up fatherless in antiquity* (Cambridge 2009); M. Harlow and R. Laurence (edd.), *A cultural history of childhood and family*, vol. I. *In antiquity* (Oxford 2010); V. Dasen and Th. Späth (edd.), *Children, memory, and family identity in Roman culture* (Oxford 2011); M. Harlow and L. Larsson Lovén (edd.), *Families in the Roman and late antique world* (London 2012); B. Rawson (ed.), *A companion to families in the Greek and Roman worlds* (Chichester 2011), with review in this issue.

3 E.g., V. Pache Huber and V. Dasen (edd.), *Politics of child care in historical perspective. From the world of wet nurses to the networks of family child care providers* (Paedagogica Historica 46.6, 2010); A.-M. Guimier-Sorbets and Y. Morizot (edd.), *L'enfant et la mort dans l'Antiquité*. I. *Nouvelles recherches dans les nécropoles grecques. Le signalement des tombes d'enfants* (Paris 2010); A. Hermary and C. Dubois (edd.), *L'enfant et la mort dans l'Antiquité*. III. *Le mobilier funéraire des sépultures d'enfants dans le monde gréco-romain* (Aix-en-Provence 2012).

4 J. Evans Grubbs and T. Parkin (edd.), *Oxford handbook of childhood and education in the classical world* (forthcoming).

logical), with a few glimpses into iconography, osteology and archaeology. He also relies on other disciplines' approaches — sociology, anthropology, demography, and psychology. His original contribution is to explore the darker side of ancient childhood by combining different perspectives that let the silhouettes of non-élite children emerge through case-studies. His subtitle, "outsiders within", refers to an expression used by H. N. Parker for defining the liminal status of wives and slaves, individuals without blood ties in the *familia*.[5] Laes applies it to children because they had little agency too. Throughout his book he questions our modern western conceptions and argues that Roman childhood must be understood as "a social rather than psychological category" (99, 244, 276, 282), placing social inequalities (free or slave, élite or non-élite) above other considerations: "biology and psychology are subordinate to the social perspective of the adult citizen" (99).

Chapter I introduces the chronological and geographical setting. He will use evidence from Italy as well as the provinces from 200 B.C. down to A.D. 400, overlapping with Christian attitudes. This wide purview, based on sources of various kinds, compensates for the paucity of written evidence.[6] Latin as well as Greek sources are used, paying attention to the different literary genres and conventions (poetry, medical writings, rhetoric, and so on) of different provenances (Egypt, East Greece, and so on). Defining the span of childhood is difficult. For Laes, its end is around the age of 15 because of epitaphs and modern definitions (1-2), the relevance of which is debatable for even bioarchaeologists cannot set a clear demarcation between childhood and adulthood due to the variability of skeletal maturity. R. Gowland and R. Redfern consider as sub-adults all individuals under 18-20 years.[7] Safer would be the term fixed by legal considerations: for girls, childhood ended with marriage, which could take place at 12 years old; boys' puberty was flexible, but at 17 they obtained full citizen rights and could enter the army. The asymmetry between the sexes reflects contrasting status between men and women; girls knew no transitional stage, but passed directly from childhood into a marital state.

Chapter II describes the ecological and demographic contexts of the Roman world in search of their impact upon children's psychology, so difficult to assess in the absence of direct reports.[8] A low life-expectancy is commonly assumed: 30-35% of newborn babies did not survive the first year, and 50% reached adulthood. Fecundity is also assumed to be high, between 4 and 6 children. One could add that educated families made use of involuntary contraception when following doctors' advice that recommended sexual relations at the end of menstruation. Laes stresses the daily presence of violence, malnutrition and lack of hygiene, especially in urban environments. The recent synthesis on *The bioarchaeology of children* by M. E. Lewis is now a very useful reference for both urban and rural populations.[9] Laes underscores "the psychosocial reality of family life in Rome" (44-49), reminding us of those aspects peculiar to the Roman nuclear family, such as omnipresent slaves with unstable loyalties to the household, and the effects of death and remarriage on the constitution of that household itself.

Chapter III discusses the perception of early childhood. Laes acknowledges attention paid to the child's survival, though he interprets the fact that early childhood was not divided into clear stages as a sign of lack of feelings towards children's physiological and mental development (77-99). Laes' search for a common theory of life phases in a broad range of treatises, including the astrological *Tetrabiblos* by Ptolemy, may lead to over-evaluating their social impact. A closer study of medical texts, for example, shows that doctors were aware of different stages of development in early childhood, varying from one infant to the other, and

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5 H. N. Parker, "Loyal slaves and loyal wives: the crisis of the outsider within and Roman *exemplum* literature," in S. R. Joshel and S. Murnaghan (edd.), *Women and slaves in Greco-Roman culture: differential equations* (London 1998) 152-73.

6 Very few authors wrote about childhood: for example, Plutarch, *The education of children*, Quintilian, *The orator's education*, and St. Augustine, *Confessions*.

7 Gowland and Redfern in Harlow and Larsson Lovén (supra n.2) 112. See also M. E. Lewis, *The bioarchaeology of children* (Cambridge 2007) 2 (age 17).

8 See also T. Parkin, "The Roman life course and the family," in Rawson, *Blackwell companion* (supra n.2) 276-90.

9 Lewis (supra n.7).

that they applied distinct treatments adapted to age and sex. Doctors' refined clinical observations display an interest in children's physiology, such as the teething process.[10] In the description of humans' life course, "the emphasis is exclusively on physical characteristics", as Laes notes (95). This can be understood in the more general context of a literary production that was not directed towards expressing psychology in general.

Some practices were hazardous, such as giving honey mixed with water to the newborn or cereals as weaning food, but they did not intend to harm — on the contrary. The small child was also cared for through the nurse and her milk. Advice on her moral and psychological aspects, as well as on how she must be fed and take physical exercise, do not deal directly with the child but are aimed at the well-being and mental development of infants.[11] Children's nutritional needs were not known, and an inappropriate diet led to metabolic diseases and skeletal lesions, such as rickets, as revealed by osteological work.[12] Laes observes that these sources, as well as epitaphs, "would appear to be indicative of a society that appreciated children" (95), but he cannot fit it into his model of "outsiders within". He claims to find "a two-fold discourse of outsider and object of expectation" (106), opposing private views, expressed by epitaphs, to formal views, based on legal status, but they do not need to be exclusive.

The following chapters introduce the reader to the grimmer aspect of Roman life. Chapter 4 examines the education of children aged between 7 and 15 years, with elementary schooling ending at 12. The rôles of the *paedagogus*, *ludi magister* and *grammaticus* are well illustrated by texts and inscriptions. Laes develops his previous reflections on child-beating (137-47); the regular use of corporal punishment in Roman education (and in later centuries) was also criticized by some as reducing children to the condition of slaves.

Non-élite children appear in chapt. 5, devoted to children's work, where Laes details important advances based on the osteological finds from Herculaneum and helpful anthropological comparisons with modern developing countries. The ancient definition of labour is complex and difficult to tackle. Laes includes all the activities relating to societal needs and/or duties, from slave miners to child magistrates. His collection of the evidence allows the reader to gain a welcome look at slave children who were made use of in urban and rural contexts as soon as they were strong enough. He offers a useful investigation (191-95) into the little-studied world of masters and apprentices, of children "on the fringes of society" in peasant families and in *latifundia*, gold mines and quarries. Prostitution is mentioned here for girls (204-5), but it is developed alongside marriage strategies in the following chapter on paedophilia and pederasty (252-59). Upper-class children appointed to offices are discussed (167-84), though these did not exert real labor but rather performed prestige functions.

Chapter 6 concerns sexual relations with boys and girls, relations governed by social and male dominance, a topic which Laes has explored successfully on earlier occasions. He demonstrates convincingly how limitations and restrictions on paedophilia and pederasty differed from those of today, and how a taboo emerged in the Middle Ages.

The concluding chapter sums up the differences between ancient and modern views and practices, with a focus on changes and continuities. Laes stresses important methodological questions and uncovers a number of fundamental differences between Roman antiquity and contemporary society, such as a less clear separation between the worlds of children and adults, an early introduction to adult life, socialization mainly through labour, and the assignment of adult attitudes. If the dangers of a modern western bias are made clear, can a too dark vision of the perception of ancient childhood be challenged?

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10 E.g., J. Bertier, "La médecine des enfants à l'époque impériale," *ANRW* II.37.3 (1996) 2147-227; L. Rossier, "Maladies infantiles et malnutrition dans l'Antiquité romaine," *Gesnerus* forthcoming.

11 V. Dasen, "Des nourrices grecques à Rome?," in Pache Huber and Dasen (supra n.3) 699-713.

12 Lewis (supra n.7) 97-132. See also R. Gowland and R. Redfern, "Childhood health in the Roman world: perspectives from the centre and margin of the empire," in E. M. Murphy (ed.), *Childhood in the past. An International Journal* 3 (2010) 15-42.

For Laes, age was of marginal importance in Roman society (280-82). If the concept of child development in the modern sense did not exist, however, other sources, in addition to the medical texts, prove the existence of different phases, marked by the performance of religious rites.[13] Can childhood be reduced to a social category? Yesterday as today, other criteria besides status were crucial among the upper and lower classes: if a child was desired, an array of rituals, prayers and votive offerings for its well-being marked its transition stages.[14] Some of them, such as the donning of the *toga virilis*, had a public importance; others, such as birthdays or other personal or family events, were private.

Were all children "outsiders within"? The provocative title refers chiefly to the author's (useful) focus on non-élite children. Elite children were not outsiders: they were constantly trained to be "within", following in the footsteps of ancestors, assimilating the family's collective memory.[15] Ancient attitudes were as varied as our modern western ones. Undesired children, whether from lower or upper classes, could be disposed of without legal prejudice.[16]

Children in the Roman empire is a most valuable synthesis that reflects the interdisciplinary ambitions of today's ancient historians. It will appeal to the general reader, as well as to social historians, for its coverage of low-status children and the harshness of their environment. It raises many issues that are not all resolved, but the wealth of information carefully collected and contextualized will serve future researchers.

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13 O. de Cazanove, "Enfants en langes: pour quels vœux?," in G. Greco and B. Ferrara (edd.), *Doni agli dei. Il sistema dei doni votivi nei santuari* (Pozzuoli 2008) 271-84; id., "Naissance et petite enfance dans le monde romain," *ThesCRA* VI (Los Angeles, CA 2011) 11-16; T. Derks, "Le grand sanctuaire de Lenus Mars à Trèves et ses dédicaces privées: une réinterpretation," in M. Dondin-Payre and M.-Th. Raepsaet-Charlier (edd.), *Sanctuaires, pratiques cultuelles et territoires civiques dans l'Occident romain* (Bruxelles 2006) 239-70.

14 E.g., R. Miller Ammerman, "Children at risk: votive terracottas and the welfare of infants at Paestum," in Cohen and Rutter (supra n.2) 131-51.

15 E.g., C. Baroin, "Remembering one's ancestors, following in their footsteps, being like them: the role and forms of family memory in the building of identity," and F. Prescendi, "How do children acquire religious knowledge? An example of knowledge transmission within the family," both in Dasen and Späth (supra n.2) 19-48 and 73-93.

16 Cf. J. Evans Grubbs in ead. and Parkin (supra n.4), forthcoming.